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ABSTRACT

An inservice course on the teaching of writing was designed to provide a content within which reflection and learning could occur. The course began with a week-long period of study and discussion of theories of language, with particular emphasis on the development of writing abilities, and a consideration of the implications of such theories for classroom practice. Teachers emerged from that week's activities with an outline of their own theories of development in writing abilities to be refined under further examination and to be tested by classroom application. This involved the preparation of writing activities designed to lead to specific kinds of finished written products, the teaching of these activities, analyses of the writing that resulted, the monitoring of progress in the writing of a number of selected students, the further refinement of these teaching units, and their publication for trial in other classrooms. During the course, teachers experienced (1) a shift from their focus on the written product and writing as an "etiquette bound event" to their active engagement in the writing process and writing as meaning centered and functional, (2) a shift from being an examining audience to being a trusted sympathetic audience, (3) less concern with surface structure correctness and more attention to what their students were doing and how their students were constructing the rules of order and cohesion, and (4) less concern with generating topic sentences and outlines. (HOD)

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DEVELOPING WRITING ABILITY: CRITERIA FOR A PROGRAM FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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May, 1981

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Developing Writing Ability: Criteria for a Program for Teachers and Students

> A faculty needs a sense of authority, not conferred by a dean, a superintendant, or a board, but arising from the members' sense that they know their field, that they understand what they're doing, that they are genuinely professionals.
>
> Ross Winterowd, "Developing a Composition Program", in Freedman and Pringle, eds., Reinventing the Rhetorical Tradition, 1980, p. 159

What do teachers of English, elementary and secondary, need to know about writing and how can they make such knowledge their own so that they become effective in the way Winterowd suggests? These were certainly two of the questions that directed our planning when we were approached by the English Language Arts Consultants of the Commission des Ecoles Catholiques de Montréal to design an in-service course on the teaching of writing to be offered to their teachers under the School Commission's mini-sabbatical scheme.

The mini-sabbatical scheme finances the release of teachers from the classroom to attend university courses designed specifically for their needs. Professional development funds formerly assigned to a few teachers for extended sabbaticals now pay for substitutes to replace teachers away for a day per week or for two weeks or more of intensive study.

It was clear to us that such a course would have to effect major changes in teachers' approaches to writing. In a city where the greater part of the population in English language schools speak English as a second or even as

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a third language, approaches to teaching writing have swung between a highly prescriptive, drills and work-book exercises, word-to-sentences-then-to paragraph approach and a laissez-faire once-a-month write-it-over-in-ink-after a correction approach. In general, approaches to teaching writing have been directed by folk-linguistic notions that are counter-productive to the teachers' best intentions. For instance, the school board's policy on evaluation of writing was inconsistent with the developmental approach implicit in some of the writing tasks recommended in the existing school program.

In a perceptive and common sense article, "In Defence of Children Writing: Learn to Write by Writing" (Highway One, Winter 1981), Frank McTeague asserts that "regardless of the research and the experts, it is the classroom teacher who must in the final analysis make the choice." (p. 56). What McTeague's article suggests is that teachers' beliefs about written language and learning determine the instructional strategies they employ and strongly affect their students' perceptions of the functions and uses of written language. Since instruction can so influence the process of learning to write, it is imperative that teachers work from a set of theoretical principals, consistent among themselves and confirmed in classroom practice.

Outlined below are the major theoretical principles and instructional assumptions we believe should direct the teaching of writing. They reflect current thinking about writing as represented especially in the work of Britton, Clay, Flower, Goodman, Graves, Halliday, Moffett, and Murray.[1]

1. Writing is a process that occurs over time. Teachers need to understand the implications of the shift from a hitherto 'product-centered' approach to writing.

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2. Writing is a process of making meaning and should be viewed in this light, rather than approached as an exercise, a "dummy run", to use John Dixon's famous phrase.

3. Writing must occur in meaningful contexts - for some purpose, in some situation, for some audience, even oneself. An intention to say so and so (as Britton puts it) must prevail, allowing the writer to determine for himself whether he is getting where he wants to go.

4. Writing must occur and does flourish in an environment that encourages risk-taking, where the writer feels free to explore and hypothesize, where errors are positive signs of efforts to make meaning, and where language use is not independent of function and meaning. Teachers might ask themselves if they provide the kind of audience that encourages such risk-taking.

5. Writing is essentially a way of <u>using</u> language - natural language use is functional and contextualized. It follows that teachers must realize and students experience an environment which encourages a wide range of language uses. Teachers need to understand and to see how order and cohesion rules, for instance, are constructed internally by the learner.

6. All writing is an attempt, and not all attempts are successful. In some modes especially, writing is a process of formulating and re-formulating. Teachers must recognize the need for and provide the contexts wherein exploratory talk and writing can naturally take place, and where teacher and peer feedback are easily available.

7. Writing is a cognitive activity and a process of discovery. Teachers need to be aware of the variety of problem-solving strategies writers might use.

Considered together these principles support the premise that development in written language occurs over a period of time and flourishes in a non-threatening literate environment which encourages varied opportunities for language use. These principles are internalized through a long process of reading, reflection, discussion, analysis, application and review. Whatever 'conversion' occurs should stand the test of failed attempts and set-backs. Moreover, teachers should work towards achieving a consistency between what they believe and what they actually do in the classroom. Harste and Burke (1977, 1979, 1980) underscore the importance of examining "the theoretical

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assumptions underlying teachers' instructional choices and critically evaluating whether these choices are the appropriate ones from which to operate instructionally". (p. 3).

Our task then was to provide a context within which such reflection and learning can occur. Thus the teachers needed time to read widely in the professional literature relating to written language development, to construct on the basis of their reading and experience their own hypotheses about writing development, to consider implications for their own practice and test those out, and from the new points of view they had developed, to take a fresh look at the writing and the writing behaviour of their students. In practice such a context was provided for by, among other things, the timetable we set up and the tasks we assigned.[3]

The course began with a five-day period of immersion in the study and discussion of theories of language with particular emphasis on the development of writing abilities, and a consideration of the implications of such theories for classroom practice. Teachers emerged from that week of intensive study with an outline of their own theories of development in writing abilities to be refined under further examination and discussion and to be tested by classroom application. That application involved the preparation of writing units - sequences of classroom activities designed to lead to specific kinds of finished written products, the teaching of these units, analyses of the writing that emerged, the monitoring of progress in the writing of a number of selected students, the further refinement of these teaching units, and their publication for trial in other classrooms.

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To allow for such activities (and the desired learning), we planned five additional meetings scheduled every second week over the next ten weeks. Teachers would thus have the opportunity to anchor their discussion and planning in classroom observation and experience. Failures and successes could be shared and modifications suggested.

To confirm teachers in their roles as initiators and animators of change, and to provide a forum in which they would exercise the authority that sound scholarship gives, a final meeting was scheduled where teachers would outline to school board officials and school administrators their theoretical stance on the development of writing abilities and the implications for classroom practice and school board policy on writing. Such a meeting would as well allow teachers to talk about their successful teaching units and the writing that resulted.

Thus the program was planned to ensure that teachers would be fully informed on developments in theory about writing; that they would be challenged to test out the implications of such theory for their own practice, that they would in other words make the theory their own; that ample opportunity would be provided for doubts to emerge and be discussed, hunches to be tested and confirmed within a context of mutual supportiveness; that they would complete the program with some firm theoretical and practical convictions, but moreso with questions that encouraged experimentation and a continuing sensitivity to and openness about the language activities of their students. Such fundamental changes would not all occur over the scheduled four month period, but beginnings would have to have been

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made. To encourage reflection about writing as a process and to have teachers rediscover for themselves how difficult and easy, how frustrating and rewarding the act of writing can be, how vulnerable the writer makes himself, teachers daily and later, weekly, recorded and shared in writing their reflections on their reading and accounts of their attempts to implement changes in their own teaching of writing.

It was through a growing awareness of their own writing processes that the teachers were able to make connections between their readings and their students' writing processes. "Children, teachers, researchers develop in similar patterns; teachers need to go through their own writing processes in learning to teach writing", writes Donald Graves (p. 96). What teachers of writing most need to know about writing is what all writers know implicity. Thus teachers became increasingly convinced that writing must occur and does flourish in a supportive environment where writers are free to hypothesize, take risks and view their errors as positive signs of their efforts to make meaning; that writers need time and opportunity to explore, question, formulate and reformulate.

These developmental principles became increasingly apparent in the observed change in our teachers' instructional choices and concerns. We saw (i) a shift in their focus from written product and writing as an "etiquette bound event" (McTeague, '81) to their active engagement in the writing process and writing as meaning-centered and functional; (ii) a shift from being an examining audience to a trusted sympathetic audience; (iii) less concern with surface structure correctness and the "dummy runs" of work-books and grammar exercises and more attention to what their students were

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doing, how their students were constructing the rules of order and cohesion; (iv) less concern with generating topic sentences and outlines and more concern with helping students develop their topics by asking appropriate qestions and with providing meaningful contexts.

The existence of a meaningful context is apparent in 7-year old Josie's daily journal entries. (see appendix). Josie writes to her teacher, asks questions, explores cursive writing and writes stories in both French and English. Students like Josie write on self-chosen topics drawn from their personal experiences; they write in environments that encourage them to file in folios completed work, as well as their work in progress, environments that support student publication, teacher-pupil conferences, and stress the importance of making meaning. We also saw a shift in student attitude towards writing ("I think the school commission should cancel composition and have kids write".) and a movement from less than 0.01% of the writing done as self-sponsored in September to 76.1% of the writing in April as unsolicited and undirected. Over 97% of one teacher's Grade XI students assessing their modified writing program reported that they now began writing more easily, that they were relaxed and more confident when they wrote, and felt their writing was more meaningful to themselves and others.

It is interesting that towards the end of the course the teachers had begun to perceive themselves in a new role, that of resource person in their schools; however, they were particularly aware that they were each a minority in their schools and that the desired changes in consciousness among their colleagues could not be accomplished in one day professional development workshops or the like. For most secondary teachers the shift in attitude and strategy they saw as required was so radical that almost all of

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them had implemented changes in only one of their four to five classes. What they recognized as required of themselves was almost in the nature of a personality change; and that was difficult to accomplish in such a short period, in public, and before so many audiences. All the teachers reported that the volume of student writing had increased considerably, and interestingly, they found the increased amount of writing less a chore to deal with. What was most satisfying is that these teachers looked forward to teaching these students and receiving their writing, and that the students responded in kind. Not surprisingly many of the teachers had become experimental in their approaches to teaching writing, conducting attitudinal studies, circulating course evaluation questionnaires, comparing effects of changes in evaluation techniques. One enterprising teacher had introduced the video-tape recorder as a means of increasing the self-confidence of his ninth grade writers. Almost all of the teachers wrote with their classes and shared their own writing.

If there was one disappointment, it was that most students were yet trapped in the notion of revision as "writing it over neatly in ink". The fact, however, that several teachers were able to bring in samples of writing in various draft stages was sufficient encouragement for teachers to persevere with the 'conferencing' approach that Donald Murray advocates. Towards the end of the year several drafts were slowly becoming the norm.

In December at our final class meeting, the teachers requested that they might meet in late April to report on their efforts and obtain feedback. It was heartening that they were looking in developmental terms at their own

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learning; however, it was already apparent in December that the teachers had begun to internalize the theoretical principles underlying the course. It was apparent in the confidence with which the teachers presented to their school board administrators and their school principals their theoretical positions on the development of writing abilities together with an account of the classroom conditions that support such development and the administrative policies that inhibit. As they presented their teaching units and displayed writing samples, it was obvious that they had acquired the authority of genuine professionals.

FOOTNOTES:

1. A copy of the course bibliography is available by writing to the authors at the Faculty of Education at McGill University.

2. The results of our investigation of the amount and type of student writing in the elementary grades are in line with similar writing surveys in Canada (Filion) and Britain (Rosen, Britton). Of the 782 samples of written work collected from 20 teachers (grades 1-6) (over a 3 day period) in 11 schools among 77 students, 92% of the items were written for correction and examination by either teachers (63%) or peers (27%) and only 5% was written for the self and less than 0.01% was self-sponsored by the students. 75% involved direct copying from the blackboard or workbooks.

3. a) Intensive Immersion - One week (5 days)

   b) Field Testing - 5 days ($\frac{1}{2}$ 1 day inservice to administrators by teachers)

   c) Reflective Reactions - One full day

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APPENDIX

This six week span in the journal of Josie, a 7½ year old grade 2 student in one of Montreal's inner-city schools, shows Josie hypothesizing about many aspects of language and its use and that this experimentation may take many forms.

1980 - 12 - 04 This is frosty the snow man and the children. (Josie includes a picture and some dialogue)

1980 - 12 - 05 Dear Miss,
When is Christmas is it on THRSDAY or MUNDAY.
ANSWER ME please
Miss from
Josie T

1980 - 12 - 09 There once was a boy called LARRY he loved christmas but he did not want the gifts of his mother and father. because they always gave him clothes. That's why he always put his gift of his mother and got mad because they were pinching him. that's why. the end.

1980 - 12 - 20 Last Sunday I watched the selfish giant on T.V. he made a house out of stones I liked it. It is a very nice story and do you like it.

1980 - 12 - 26 Josie experiements with cursive writing and writes out the alphabet.

1980 - 12 - 28 Josie decides to write in French "Voici le bebe LOIN"

1980 - 12 - 29 Josie writes a story in French
Voici le Loutin
Flout, Flout, Flout, Flout (invented spellings)
Fait tous les shose
ga sone de moegece
voici flout flout (¼ diagram)

1981 - 01 - 03 Josie experiments with cursive writing

1981 - 01 - 28 Josie writes a story in French and which appears in book form. "le trois pitist cochon".

LEARNING TO WRITE - WRITING TO LEARN

Patrick Dias
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May, 1981

BASIC PRINCIPLES	EDUCATING TEACHERS	EDUCATING STUDENTS
Writing is a developmental process.	Teachers need TIME to become knowledgeable about writing as a developmental process and about actively engaging students in the process of writing Teachers need to engage in the process of writing and need to be aware of the various stages of the writing process.	Students need TIME to learn to write and to internalize the process by actively engaging in the process of writing.
Writing must occur and does flourish in a risk-free literate environment where writers are free to discover meaning and to realize their intentions in a trial - ERROR with varied opportunities for language use.	Teachers need real and varied opportunities to try things out, to hypothesize and take risks. Teachers need to see/to view ERRORS as positive elements in the process of making meaning and that language use is not independent of function and meaning. Teachers need to provide students with a wide range of Language Use.	Students need varied and real opportunities to explore and hypothesize. Students need to be encouraged to take risks. Their errors are positive signs of development. Language Use is meaningful when it is functional and personally based for the Language User to some extent. Students must experience varied opportunities for Language Use.
Writing must occur in meaningful contexts for some purpose in some situation, for some intended audience.	Teachers must experience meaningful contexts for writing and for learning how to help students develop their writing ability. Teachers must interact with peers in meaningful contexts. Teachers need to ensure students are writing for varied audiences/purposes.	Students must experience meaningful contexts for writing. Students must interact with peers and adults in meaningful contexts. Students need to experience writing for varied audiences and purposes.

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BASIC PRINCIPLES	EDUCATING TEACHERS	EDUCATING STUDENTS
Writing is a process of formulating and reformulating.	Teachers need to talk and to write to formulate their thinking. Teachers need to take an active part in constructing their beliefs about writing.	Students need to talk and to write to formulate their thinking. Students need to take an active part in all they do.
Writing is a cognitive process and process of discovery.	Teachers need to focus on writing as a cognitive process and process of discovery to be aware of the variety of problem-solving strategies and heuristic strategies writers might use.	Students need to focus on the process of writing as a discovery process and need to be aware of the variety of problem-solving strategies they can use to realize their intentions.
Writing is a meaning-centered process.	Teachers need to make sense of their teaching in order that they can help students discover and make meaning through purposeful activities vs. "dummy runs."	Students need to make sense of their learning and need to focus on acomplishing their goals and realizing their intentions through purposeful activities vs. "dummy runs."
Writing is a Language Centered process; natural Language Use is functional and contextualized.	Teachers need to experience wide range of Language Uses. Teachers need to create learning environments which encourage a wide range of Language Uses. Teachers need to understand and to see how how order, cohesion Language rules are constructed internally by the learner.	Students must experience a wide range of Language Uses. Students need to create their own order, cohesion Language rules by using Language in varied natural functional and meaningful contexts.
Writers need to discover their own INNER voices in a supportive environment.	Teachers need to discover their own INNER voices in a supportive environment. Teachers need to believe in their own ability to grow and to trust their students ability to grow and to mean.	Students need to discover their own INNER voices in a supportive environment. Students must believe in their own ability to grow and to mean.